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ABSTRACT

The process of grief following the suicide of a peer is a difficult problem for adolescents and cannot be equated with how an adult might experience it. The theoretical concern in this paper was that teenagers in Guam might demonstrate a different attitude toward openly communicating their feelings and thoughts about such a sensitive topic as suicide. A workshop was developed to help these adolescents effectively deal with the process of grieving after a classmate's death. The workshop began with 25 questions meant to evoke emotions leading to demonstrations of the students' feelings and a description of the events that brought about those feelings. The one issue that did not arise is that close friends of teenagers who commit suicide are often blamed by the parents of the deceased for some part in their child's suicide. The counselor concluded the workshop by suggesting to the students that positive action be taken to honor the memory of their classmate. An opportunity was given to students to put into writing something affirming about their friend and samples of their writings are included in the appendix. The workshop provided a means of reaching the adolescents that involved cooperation and consultation between a responsible adult and some student leaders. (Contains 4 appendixes and 2 references.) (JDM)

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The Stages of Grieving a Teenager's Suicide

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Abstract

The process of grieving by teenagers can be quite different from that of adults. This is particularly true when the death is a suicide. The parents will often blame the friends of their child. Even where they do not blame, adults often discount teenagers' need to grieve, and do not include them in the grief rituals to an extent that is significant. This article shows how a counselor and two student presenters (both having experienced a friend's suicide) developed a workshop for teen grief. Teens need to talk with each other, but they also need an adult to structure the dialogue and the action response. Supplied with a structured list of questions, and some general rules of teaching, selected teens (monitored by a counselor) can learn to present a grief workshop. These workshops can be valuable in not only resolving grief issues, but in being a part of prevention efforts as vulnerable teens see the end results of actions they may be contemplating.

Grieving the Death of a Friend

The Stages of Grieving a Teenager's Suicide

The point of our study was to develop an effective workshop for the grieving process of teenagers who have lost a classmate to suicide. It is a combination of things that eventually brings on a crisis. In that combination, the fact of being an adolescent has a prime role in the process. At no other time in life does a person have so many challenges, and often so little help.

We hypothesized the grieving process as successive stages. However, it is probably closer to reality to think of it as a complex fusion, a maelstrom, a typhoon of thought and emotion in constant flux. Different elements being predominant at different times. The particular nature of the experience will depend on the person going through it. So, a teenager will have other issues than an adult.

The design of the workshop followed our hypothesis by being a list of twenty-five questions (see Appendix A) that sequentially represent five stages of teen grief. Depression and shock, blame and guilt, negotiation, acceptance, and action. We proceeded to use the questions to develop information from our audience. We drew out the knowledge and concern of the students. We did not impose our views. We listened and facilitated what they said. We will incorporate what we learn at each workshop into the next workshop.

Our theoretical concerns were that we felt that teenagers in Guam, due to local culture would likely demonstrate a different attitude toward openly communicating their feelings and thoughts in such a delicate area as suicide. Further, that the repression of their feeling and thoughts would not be positive for their own healing. The population of

our public schools on Guam is largely Christian and Micronesian. Both of these cultures are commonly thought to promote a shameful attitude toward suicide. (The Christian attitude actually tells people to assume an unstable condition in the mind of the suicide, which erases any guilt which might be ascribed to the person.). We wished to allow students to at least hear the emotions and thought that the questions identified and that some fellow students would discuss.

The writing opportunity that followed then gave them a different opportunity to express themselves in that manner instead of in front of an audience. We hoped that they will eventually replace repressed emotions with thought and action. As we saw, there was indeed little response from the audience. A few vocal students did a considerable amount of the talking. However, the writing opportunity drew numerous responses. The responses were thoughtful as well as emotional.

Method

Two student presenters took our questions to a classroom in a public High School on Guam (see Appendices C and D). That particular classroom was one in which a student had committed suicide in the not distant past. There is an old saying among the Navajo people that if you look for something in particular you will not find what you are ***not*** looking for. We went there with the notion that if we were aware of the types of things that ***might*** surface (our five stage plan), as well as being open to anything that ***would*** surface, we were priming ourselves to gather the maximum that could come from our experience.

The presentation was meant to evoke emotions that would lead to demonstrations of students' feelings and the events that brought about those emotions. True healing may

not come about without a physical demonstration of emotion. Tears, talk, hugs, wails, poetry, etc. Anything that allows feelings to come out. And then, there will appear the need to discuss. To make verbal what was primal and tacit. So, one questions the students. Reactions and answers occur. Hopefully, more questions are generated from the audience. More answers, also.

The counselor was the observer sitting in the back of the room and not participating. The two student presenters did a credible job. They did not lead the student participants other than the preplanned questions. The idea was to respect the answers and emotions of the audience and let the discussion take on a life of its own. Transitions took place as the audience seemed to exhaust a question, or topic, and then the presenters would move to the next question. The idea was to advance the experience along the path of the five stages from the exploration of sadness to the closure of planning to take action.

The major question from the audience was, "Did you ever think of suicide?" This was asked of both presenters and the classroom teacher as well. The stimulus behind this was probably the fact that many people in this world ***do*** at least ***think*** of suicide at some point in their lives. Teens, like young children, do not feel in their emotions nor understand in their thinking that bad things come to an end, and that "solutions" only solve things temporarily, and that life is a series and a compound of good and bad. Like young children they feel that any pain they experience will go on and on and on. Adults know better. However, think about what you would do if you faced an endless future of pain and sadness. The great message we can give teens is that we learn to live with pain knowing that joy is also a component of existence.

Results

Like any class, some students participated to a high degree while others were silent. The student presenters were very good at involving the silent students, as were their fellow classmates. When prodded to speak, they were capable of expressing some emotions. One issue did not arise. The close friends of teen suicides are often blamed by the parents of the suicide and excluded from rituals such as rosaries and funerals. No one in this group identified themselves as a close friend. Closely allied to this is the belief on the part of many adults that the grief of teens is not real. That they do not have the maturity to experience real sorrow and that their emotions are shallow. This may be true of some teens at the lower edge of adolescence. Enough to give rise to the stereotype that this is true of all teens. However, we have seen real, unmistakable grief in teens that we know.

At the end, the counselor took over the presentation and reviewed the workshop with the class. Were they ready to take some action? They would be honoring the memory of their classmate, but not the act of suicide. They would also be affirming life and dealing with their fears. Did they have any suggestions? They did not. It was suggested that they needed time to things over. We would return again after the Spring break, which was commencing the next day. After the break, we offered to students the opportunity to put something in writing concerning their friend. The response was almost universal. Some of the responses are shown in Appendix B.

Discussion

Our theoretical concerns seem to have been borne out. Our audience did have a tendency to be quiet in "public", and yet were very responsive and open when given the

opportunity to write their feelings. We need to develop means of reaching our children that involve cooperation and consultation between a responsible adult and some student leaders. We should allow for various types of response and feedback. We should be available to honestly answer the most personal of questions. Without truth we are not really communicating our wisdom and experience, and therefore our children are not receiving it.

Fitzgerald (2000) emphasizes the role of direct contact with teens. She offers some general ideas concerning teen grief, some frequently asked questions, and some suggested answers. Teen Age Grief, Inc. http://www.smartlink.net/~tag/index.html (2001) offers a variety of materials to be used by organizations and school districts to establish support programs. However, I feel that we need to particularize any "borrowed" materials to our island's cultures; and, adapt to the times as they change.

References

Fitzgerald, H. (2000). The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Teen Age Grief, Inc. http://www.smartlink.net/~tag/index.html.

Appendix A

The Questions

These are leading questions. A starting point for expanded discussions.

1. What does it mean to be a friend?
2. Are females closer than males in their relationships?
3. Is showing friendship enough or do we have to tell it?
4. Is a suicide different from other deaths like those from illness or accident?
5. Do the parents of a suicide react differently to the friends?
6. Do friends have the right to grieve?
7. What happens to the friends if they do not grieve?
8. What happens to the friends even if they do grieve?
9. How difficult is it to say the words "death" and "goodbye"?
10. What rituals are used in your culture to "send" the dead person on their way? What kind of burial? Do these rituals help the survivors?
11. If you are excluded from the family rituals, what can you do?
12. What happens to the friendships of those left behind?
13. What do we mean by mourning?
14. How long should we mourn?
15. Tell me about not wanting to be disturbed in your grief.
16. Tell me about tears.
17. Tell me about anger.
18. Tell me about getting back to your routines.
19. Tell me about asking for help and giving help to others.

20. Tell me about letting go.

21. others. Tell me about remembering.

22. Tell me about acceptance of the way things are.

23. Create something beautiful in honor of your friend.

24. Learn the lessons taught by your friend's death.

25. Teach others.

Appendix B

Student Written Responses

A small selection of the many responses received. They followed certain themes: expressions of love, loss, and helplessness ("Why didn't you ask for help?).

1. "I miss you and I won't forget about you".
2. "He was friendly, he do his work and try to turn it in on time. He would respect you and shake your hand if he sees you somewhere or say hello to you in the hallway or anywhere else".
3. "He was a pretty cool dude although quiet most of the time. It's just sad to find out that instead of talking to someone like a good friend or someone he turned to suicide for the answer to his problems, If I could have done something to stop him committing suicide, I would've done it".
4. "Well he was a friend and I first met him at my bus stop. He was cool and I knew he liked me but I got close to him and he would always watch out for me. Something happen to me one night and if it wasn't for him things would be worst. He was there for me and I thank him with all my heart. I miss him dearly. I don't know why he did what he did but I hope he is doing good up there".
5. "I didn't really know him but he was really quiet in class. It looked like nothing was really wrong with him. He was an all right guy. Sorry can't say much".
6. "He was a very quiet person. He never really talked but he was really nice. He would talk to the people that sat next to him. He didn't look like he had any problems and that he would do that to himself".

Appendix C

Liezl San Gil

Ninth Grade Student

Personally, Jezerae and I did a fairly good job. The workshop was definitely a learning and growing experience for me as well. I am glad that I had a chance to work with this class for the first time. And be able to communicate and understand them.

It wasn't until I stood in the front of the class that I started to get a nervous rush through me. But once I started off the questions and the students were answering them, all of a sudden I lost my nervousness. I tried to stay calm and confident about myself, which kept me going.

As much as possible, I tried to involve the other students to share their feelings. There will always be a student who won't speak up until you ask them to. If not, they won't say anything. So I learned that if we assure them that it is ok to feel how they feel and to share how they feel things will be better. There will also always be talkative students who are eager to share their thoughts. But it was only fair to give the others chance to speak.

I am pleased at the cooperation and communication this class showed. They paid attention and willingly participated. I hope in the future we can get groups that will open up more and not be scared.

The surprise was when a student asked me if I had ever thought of suicide. I was shocked and unprepared. I tried not to act up. Of course, I wanted to tell him the truth. "Yes, it has ran my mind a few times as one of my solutions". I had to be honest with the

class. I'm not perfect. I'm human. There's some point of your life where you would think of killing yourself. But did I do it? No, I looked and asked for help and I did find it.

Now I have learned from what I have gone through and I want to share this with everyone. This is my main purpose in doing this whole project. I want to let everyone know that there is help and I know it because I went through it. I want to let them know that there are people you can talk to and run to for help and guidance.

In conclusion, I seek in the future to improve our presentation so that the audience will get a better feel of what we are trying to do and say. I hope to have better workshops and learn from my mistakes.

Appendix D

Jezerae Quitugua

Ninth Grade Student

I think this workshop was a great way to interact with people who are going through a very sentimental moment and a good way to let them know that they can confide in us. If they don't feel comfortable talking to us then there are other people they can run to. At first I was nervous. I learned that no one would cooperate with us. I was shocked that many of them seemed immersed in their feelings and didn't want to talk. They seemed to be suppressing their thoughts and feelings. I think that this workshop is just the beginning.